

## MEMO

May 8, 2008

**TO:** Joint Policy Committee

**FR:** Kenneth Kirkey, ABAG Planning Director

Jaqueline Guzman, ABAG Regional Planner

**RE:** Regional Adoption of Priority Conservation Areas

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The Joint Policy Committee (JPC) received updates from staff on the Priority Conservation Area (PCA) nominations received at its September, 2007 meeting and an update on the review process at its February, 2008 meeting. This memo outlines the purpose for identifying Priority Conservation Areas, a summary of the first call for nominations, and lessons learned through this first round of review. At the May 16<sup>th</sup> JPC meeting, staff seeks JPC support for the programmatic addition of Priority Conservation Areas to the FOCUS Program, the Bay Area's Regional Blueprint Plan. Staff recommendations on specific PCA nominations will be presented to the ABAG Regional Planning Committee (RPC) in June, 2008 for feedback and then submitted to the ABAG Executive Board for adoption in July, 2008.

### FOCUS & Priority Conservation Areas

FOCUS is an incentive-based strategy to work together with local and regional entities in the nine county San Francisco Bay Area. It encourages future growth in areas near existing or planned transit and within existing communities (priority development areas) and the conservation of regionally significant resource areas that have consensus for protection in the near-term (priority conservation areas).

The purpose for identifying Priority Conservation Areas as part of the FOCUS Program is to highlight near-term opportunities for land conservation in the San Francisco Bay Area that have consensus for protection. Highlighting these areas as part of a regional planning program is intended to help inform the distribution of public funds and leverage private funds and new partnerships to invest in these areas. Decisions as to what land to conserve and how (purchase or easement) will need to be determined at the local level among willing and interested landowners and a land trust or other entity. If interest exists for conserving a piece of land among all parties, PCAs can serve as a tool to try to help leverage funding and partnerships.

Adoption of PCAs as part of the FOCUS Program advances implementation of regional goals to support livable communities and protect and steward the lands we depend on. Ultimately, land use decisions get made on the local level as to where to grow and what areas to preserve, so adoption of a priority area does not change local plans or zoning. FOCUS intends to help inform local decisions and to help local entities achieve their goals that also benefit the region.

### Summary of the First Call for PCA Nominations

Approximately 100 nominations were received through the first call for PCA nominations. The nominations received represent an array of conservation values ranging from agriculture to habitat and recreation. Nominations were solicited for areas that represent regionally significant conservation values

and have consensus and urgency for protection. Nominations were submitted by local governments, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations.

Staff has worked over the last several months to reduce the amount of overlap among the nominations submitted, ensure local government support for a nomination made within their jurisdiction, and maintain communication with regional and local conservation-related planning efforts. Staff has received input from local governments and a review panel comprised of land conservation experts from across the region as well as stakeholder representation from economic, affordable housing, and urban land development entities.

In summary, most nominations submitted will be recommended for adoption to ABAG's Executive Board in July, 2008. However, upon review against the nomination criteria, some nominations are not ready for recommendation as part of the FOCUS Program at this time. A nomination may not be considered ready for the following reasons:

- A local government could not support the nomination at this time. (relates to the consensus criteria)
- A local planning process is underway, which included planning for the nominated area. (relates to the consensus criteria)
- Although locally important, the nomination did not amount to appropriate consideration as a regionally significant area. (relates to the regional significance criteria)

Future nomination cycles are expected. Thus, a nomination not recommended for adoption through the first call for nominations, can be re-submitted in following nomination cycles stating how the original reason for non-recommendation has been addressed.

#### Lessons Learned & Potential Improvements to Future PCA Nomination Cycles

Several important lessons were learned through the first call for nominations and review process. Staff would like to continually improve future calls for PCA nominations and will incorporate these lessons into future nomination cycles.

- Although consensus is a nomination criterion, local government support can only be secured for certain if it is explicitly stated as a requirement in the nomination guidelines. During the first round of review, staff ensured local governments did not oppose nominations made within their boundaries by undertaking a concerted outreach effort to notify local governments of nominations made within their boundaries and requested that staff be notified if a nomination could not be supported.
  - Going forward, nominees will have to demonstrate local government support through a council resolution or letter of support from the Planning Director or City Manager.
- Although the nomination criteria emphasized consensus for protection, some nominations were submitted for areas that clearly still needed additional time to reach a general level of consensus.
  - The proposed requirement to ask nominees to demonstrate local government support is also expected to help address this.
- Although the San Francisco Bay Area region has been successful in establishing a network of open space, many opportunities still exist to conserve and enhance this network. This point was realized when staff received an overwhelming response to the first call for nominations.
  - Staff will continue to collaborate with the Coastal Conservancy's San Francisco Bay Program and regional conservation organizations to support collaborative approaches to conservation within this region.

- Although applicants were encouraged to collaborate on nomination submissions and some counties did, many nominations received were still duplicative or overlapping.
  - Staff will modify the nomination guidelines to incorporate guidance on how to coordinate nominations at the city and county levels.
- The nomination criteria for urgency was not very helpful in the review of nominations received because relatively any nominated area in the region can demonstrate some opportunity for conservation or threat to the ecological integrity of the area.
  - Going forward, this criterion will be tailored to emphasize near-term conservation opportunities.
- Although regional significance was a nomination criterion, some submitted nominations were essentially valuable but not regionally significant local projects. While regionally significant resources pass through urbanized areas, such as regional trails and waterways, and should be considered as part of the PCA process of the FOCUS Program, staff does not see site specific public serving spaces, such as pocket parks, as aligned with the goals of conserving regionally significant resource areas. Local projects in Priority Development Areas will be supported through the Priority Development Area process, since they support efforts to create complete communities. Staff will continue working with Priority Development Area jurisdictions on funding opportunities through a potential capital funding program to support the development and restoration of urban parks..
  - Going forward, staff will provide specific guidance as to distinguish between a local and a regionally significant nomination.
- Communication of what PCAs are and are not intended to achieve should be emphasized early and often.
  - Staff will continue to refine the communication strategy for PCAs. The creation of additional online information and a report is intended to clarify this message.

#### Next Steps

With the support of the JPC, staff will present recommended nominations to the ABAG Regional Planning Committee (RPC) for review and then to the ABAG Executive Board for adoption. Staff will proceed to summarize the adopted PCAs and highlight the benefits of a coordinated strategy for development and conservation through FOCUS. Mapping and outreach materials will serve as tools to highlight the conservation values PCAs provide. These materials will provide PCA contacts with a resource to help leverage additional funding and partnerships. FOCUS staff will also provide assistance in convening meetings with key funders and potential partners outside the traditional conservation community.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

THAT the JPC support the programmatic addition of Priority Conservation Areas to the FOCUS Program, the Bay Area's Regional Blueprint Plan. Staff recommendations on specific PCA nominations will be presented to the ABAG RPC in June, 2008 for feedback and then submitted to the ABAG Executive Board for adoption in July, 2008.